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SUBJECT: PREMIER WEN'S VISIT TO JAPAN DOMINATES NEWS CYCLE

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

11. (C) Mainland media has presented saturation coverage of Premier Wen Jiabao's trip to Japan this week as print, online and broadcast media have given the visit top billing. With few exceptions, the treatment has been straightforward and upbeat. The official and popular press has emphasized Premier Wen's focus on building economic ties, energy issues and his warmly received speech in the Japanese Diet. The Propaganda Department has handed down no formal guidelines on covering the visit, our contacts said, although some outlets continue to practice self-censorship to avoid missteps on an inherently sensitive issue. Internet discussion forums have been flooded with commentary about the visit, mostly lauding Premier Wen's performance and the positive implications of a potential improvement in Sino-Japan ties for China's future. Beijing's university students do not appear overly focused on the Premier's travels. One Beijing University student said the mood on Japan has calmed considerably since the April 2005 anti-Japan demonstrations. Some chatters on the "Strong Nation" patriotic web forum were more negative, however, urging Chinese to have "no illusions" in their dealings with Japan. End Summary.

All The Upbeat News That Fits

12. (C) Media reports on Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Japan this week have been resoundingly upbeat. The official Party mouthpiece the People's Daily has run front-page coverage, complete with photos above the fold, each day of the visit. On April 13, the paper printed a picture of Premier Wen meeting Emperor Akihito. The official Guangming Daily's front pages have followed suit and the paper also published an editorial on April 12 praising "a new era of mutual prosperity" for China and Japan.

13. (C) High-circulation print outlets have also given the visit pride of place, with the popular daily The Beijing News running a steady diet of front page headlines and pictures, along with a number of opinion pieces. Among the latter, a typically optimistic example in the paper's April 13 edition played on the "melting the ice" theme, noting in the headline that "spring is expected." The CCTV nightly national news broadcast has also aired ample adulatory coverage of the visit. In the run-up to the visit, the Government-run TV network also broadcast a documentary series on Japanese society that was noteworthy for its avoidance of thorny historical issues and other

disputes.

¶4. (C) The weekly magazine "Oriental Outlook," which is under the editorial umbrella of the official Xinhua News Service, ran an attention-grabbing cover about China-Japan relations on its April 12 edition -- a superimposed picture of the actress Zhang Ziyi waving elegantly in the foreground to a sumo wrestler standing in a dark background. The article inside was one of the few to sound a downbeat note, reporting survey results of Chinese and Japanese university students' impressions of each others' countries. The headline read, "Japan and China: So Close, Yet So Far Away." The poll results indicated that 46 percent of Chinese college students have a "not good" or worse view of Japan, while some 56 percent of Japanese students held negative impressions of China. Only 13 percent of Chinese students have a "good" or "very good" opinion of Japan, while 8 percent of Japanese students see China in a positive light.

No Guidelines, But Self-Censorship

¶5. (C) The Propaganda Department has not handed down any formal guidelines regarding the visit, said Zhou Qing'an (protect), a professor at the Tsinghua University School of Journalism and Communications and a free lance journalist. Zhou speculated, however, that propaganda guardians may have called editors and urged them informally to present the visit in a positive light. In any case, he said editors and journalists are practicing self-censorship on the Japan visit story. Zhou, who wrote the April 13

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Beijing News "spring is expected" opinion piece, said he composed the column in a rush as a favor to the editor in chief after the latter spiked another journalist's draft for being "inadequately optimistic." As part of this, Zhou said Mainland media outlets are choosing to shy away from sore subjects such as history, Japan's position on Taiwan, territorial disputes and other issues.

¶6. (C) In fact, despite the good cheer on the air waves, media still must tread carefully in its treatment of Japan issues, said Sanlian Life Weekly journalist Cai Wei (protect). The popular magazine, which aims for a middle-class, urban readership, intended to run a series of features about Japanese history and culture concurrently with the Wen visit, Cai related. Although the content was not controversial on the surface, editors were skittish because of trouble the journal had with the censors in ¶2006. The magazine was reprimanded four times last year for articles on the Cultural Revolution, Tibet and other issues that propagandists deemed inappropriate. Cai stressed that at a time when Sanlian's circulation is growing and advertising profits are up, editors do not want to risk disciplinary action. "We decided to be careful," Cai acknowledged, and scrap the planned Japan pieces.

"Strong Nation" Netizens Preach Caution ...

¶7. (C) Internet chat rooms have been largely devoid of the usual anti-Japan bashing as netizens have instead focused on hope for improved bilateral relations. Unsurprisingly, national pride has come through in many posts. One chatter on a Sina.com forum, discussing the countries' difficult history, wrote that "as long as we are strong and independent, we can't feel insulted by other countries." At the same time, the "Strong Nation" forum, a magnet for

those with vigorously patriotic views, was home to thousands of colorful comments. Some were cautious, such as the netizen who wrote that "China should have no illusions about Japan." But others were more extreme, such as one hardliner who wrote that as long as China keeps growing and "freezes Japan out for 10 more years, then Japan will be nothing."

... While Students Yawn

18. (C) Meanwhile, on university campuses in Beijing, where the April 2005 demonstrations started, students are taking a low-key approach to Premier Wen's Japan visit, said Shi Rong, a senior at Beijing University. Shi related that among her classmates, very few are paying attention to the news from Tokyo and Kyoto. "The mood is much calmer than two years ago," she said, ascribing the change in part to the recent lack of negative press about Japan. In this vein, she judged that students "tend to get agitated only when the news is bad." Because young people get most of their information online, when they glance at the headlines on Internet news portals, they tend to pass over the links to news stories that seem dry. "But if one of the headlines read 'Japanese Parliament Member Throws Tomato at Wen Jiabao,' of course we would all read it," Shi said.
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